It comes down to Commitment and Hard Work: The Story (so far) of the Kombuni Water Development Self-Help Group in Kenya

In 2023, Village Volunteers sponsored a four-day training of Community Educators on Climate Change in Makueni County, south east Kenya. Participants included 11 women and 6 men from the Kombuni Water Development Self Help Group. Included in the funding for the training was approximately £90 for post-training activities which Kombuni used to start a "table banking" scheme with 19 group members to boost their income. The training also supported Kombuni's efforts to take a more integrated response to climate change and tied in with Kombuni (with other external support) commencing construction on a sand dam.

In this article, ***Patrick Mbullu*** *(pictured right), one of the trainers in the training and a leading member of the Kombuni Group, shares more about the group and their progress.*

BACKGROUND

The Kombuni Water Development Self Help Group (KWDSHG) was originally established in 1998 in Makueni County in south east Kenya and registered in 1999 with the Kenyan Ministry of Gender and Social Services. After a period of inactivity, it was re-constituted in June 2022.

The area is semi-arid, with little and unreliable rainfall and frequent droughts. As the main source of income is farming, community members' livelihoods are affected directly by food and water insecurity, resulting in poverty and other vulnerabilities.

The group's membership is drawn from 5 villages, all in Kee Ward, Kaiti Sub-County, Makueni County: Iiani, Kitandi, Kinganga, Kyamwalye and Ukya. There are currently 27 active members, 16 women and 11 men. It has approximately 200 beneficiaries (average household members range between 5-7). Not all beneficiaries participate in the project, yet they all benefit from the group's work: we have to recognise that people have other commitments, such as fetching water or watering their livestock.

The **purpose** of the group is to:

- Promote & advance environmental education, health, water conservation and mitigation of climate change effects and impacts
- Relieve poverty for Kee Ward residents
- Promote trade, industry and employment to inhabitants of Kee Ward
- Promote, establish, operate and/or support other schemes and projects of a charitable nature

ACHIEVEMENTS

As part of the revival of the group in 2022, they developed a medium term plan for the group, setting out their ambitions up to 2029 in the arenas of water and environmental conservation, food security, income generation and capacity building. The progress so far (August 2025) is:

1. **To enable the KWDSHG Community to access clean, safe & sufficient water for domestic, livestock, environmental conservation, irrigation farming and income generation**

The main achievement here is the construction of two sand dams with shallow wells and sub-tanks on the rivers Weu and Munyuni. The Weu dam has been completed and work on the Munyuni dam is well under way.

Members of the Kombuni Group and the local community involved in the sand dam construction

The completed dam

2. **To promote environmental conservation through tree planting, terracing, pasture production & cover crop growing in KWDSHG Community**

a) Tree planting: We have a tree nursery demo plot where each year we have outperformed our planned activities (the plan was to plant 1,000 trees/year). The SHG has germinated over 5,000 tree seedlings, distributing them to group members, two primary schools and another self-help group. Two members, next to the water source, have added a further 5,000 seedlings on their own initiative, so all together we have planted over 10,000 trees.

b) Terracing: Each member commits to the number of metres they will terrace on their plots. These amounts vary, but in 2023 members dug a total of 3,810 metres and in 2024-25 it rose to 7,050 metres. The numbers are high (1,000m/year of terracing was planned) as two members have plots adjacent to the sand dam and their plots need terracing to reduce siltation.

c) Pasture production: A demo plot was donated by a member, terracing done, pasture planted but the Nov-Jan rains were inadequate. In addition, it is probable that the seeds may have expired or require more rains than the region receives.

d) Cover crops: Training on this has been carried out with a government expert and members are practising this on the plots. Another partner, Bio-Vision has come on board and has provided useful information on how to intercrop and not leave our shambas (small farms) exposed to the harsh weathers.

3. **To increase food production to promote food security in KWDSHG**

a) Seed bank: The African Sand Dam Foundation (ASDF) provided initial drought resistant seeds which were disbursed to members. After planting, a member returns twice the amount they received. The group has a demo plot where they planted beans. Over the past two seasons the group harvested and returned 158 kilograms, stored for future disbursement.

b) Post-harvest management: This training was provided by a Ministry of Agriculture personnel – how to reduce waste from pests. A group granary store is under construction to store the returned produce for future disbursement.

c) Organic Manure Production & fertilisers: The Bio-Vision officer (*pictured right*) has begun training on this in July 2025 and our compost manure is ready for use

4. To increase income through water sales, pasture production, tree seedlings, table banking, bee keeping, crop, livestock & tree farming in KWDSHG community

a) Fruit tree farming: Individual members are growing 200 avocado trees, 20 mango and 20 citrus.

b) Voluntary loans and saving (table banking): The group operated a merry-go-round scheme from 2023 with the 15,000/- (then £90) donated from the climate change training. With training from ASDF, table banking began in January 2025. Members buy shares which determine the amount one can borrow and be rewarded as dividends at the end of the year. As of 14th July 2025 the total money in circulation was Kshs 78,860/- (approx. £454)

c) Sanitary Towel production (social enterprise): ASDF provided training on health and hygiene in Nov 2024. As part of this, members practised making sanitary towels that are cost effective, re-usable and environmentally friendly

5. To increase skills & knowledge on farming, income generation, environmental conservation & protection through capacity building for KWDSHG community

In addition to the climate change training a total of 10 training sessions have been held, including topics such as group formation and management, identification and management of community assets, common diseases, environment (including sustainable use of timber), savings schemes.

IMPACT

1. **Empowerment & capacity building:** Thanks to the training and the opportunities provided by the group, community members are better able to critically analyse their conditions and find ways to improve their lives.

Catherine and Erastus Muthenya *(Erastus pictured left)*, who are members of KWDSHG, purchased a desolate piece of land in December 2024 next to the sand dam. They have turned this degraded piece of land into an Eden. Whilst rain fed farming in the region is twice per year, the couple plant all year round and are able to harvest every three months. Their family of four children and two grandchildren are well protected from the adverse effects of droughts and unpredictable rainfall. Catherine says her daughter, Stacy, now in her 2nd year in university will not face the normal challenges of being sent home for fees and other support.

2. **Evident Environmental Changes:**
   - Visibly greener river banks: indigenous vegetation growing and previously lost wildlife returning.
   - There is noticeable freshness in the air and emerging small forests in people's homes due to the increase in tree-planting by members.
3. **Recognition of Women as key to development**: Gender advocates argue for the promotion of the participation of poor, amongst them women who are most marginalised. In KWDSHG more women than men (15 vs 11 respectively) participate in all the group activities.
4. **Meeting Gender Strategic Needs:** The Voluntary Loan and Savings Scheme (Table Banking), began in January 2025, after a two-day training by ASDF, has achieved great strides towards greater gender equality. Members, those active in the construction of the sand dams, buy monthly shares (min 50/- per share and max 250/-). This has helped in changing existing gender roles as men and women can participate equally and benefit from the scheme. Loans have enabled women to start their own projects like poultry, rabbit and goat keeping from loans with favourable interest rates.

CHALLENGES

1. **Ageing membership/limited youth participation:** The average membership age is 58 years- the oldest is 81 and the youngest 26. Sand dam construction in particular is strenuous and demanding: hauling, lifting large and heavy stone boulders and mixing cement. The construction schedule period is also very tight. The young, who would inevitably benefit most in future from these sand dams, are absent and do not participate because there is no pay. They argue they have young families to fend for hence they prefer to look for casual work.

2. **Misinterpretation of Volunteerism:** Volunteerism is believed to guarantee ownership and sustainability of development initiatives within a community. Nevertheless, many of the group members are poor, and see volunteerism as exploitation – the youth especially cannot visualise their free participation and commitment as a guarantee to lift themselves from this predicament, hence their absence.
3. **Plenty of Water but most farm plots far:**

Only a handful of members are close to water and not all are utilising it optimally due to financial constraints. The long-term plan is to distribute water close to member plots but this will take time. Two members are currently utilising the water year-round (see Catherine and Erastus case study above).

4. **Gender inequalities:** The issue is about acknowledging existing differences between men and women to ensure equal participation in project implementation processes. Our experience

shows that roles relating to children and care for the home (including child bearing and raising, school runs, finding water and firewood, looking after animals) are left mainly to women, hence high absenteeism in the group's twice a week workdays. The men folk are either out there looking for casual work or in towns working (although many don't remit their earning back to the family).

LESSONS LEARNT

1. **Hard work pays/learning from experience:** The exchange visit to Ndwae Ngutwae Self-Help Group (a 24-member group) in November 2024 was an eye opener to members. They saw a group of committed members – aged yet very energetic. The group was 14 years old and had several thriving projects – a seed bank store, a two-acre plantation of Mukau (agro-forestry), a tree nursery, a shop and a voluntary loan and saving scheme. The latter, they said, had accumulated millions of Kenyan shillings to members. They reported that in June 2024 (half year returns), they disbursed Kshs 800,000/ to members. For the agro-forestry (Mukau) project, they expected to earn over Kshs 10 million once they begin harvesting for timber. The chair said he had harvested his own plantation that August and had earned more than Kshs 2 million.
2. **Nothing is impossible once you put your heart into it:** When the quotation of raw materials was given, members assumed they were being misled by ASDF officers. But when the construction of the sand dam begun, members realised the magnitude of the task ahead of them. Our sand dam needed 178 trailers of stones, 189 of sand and 1700 bags of cement. It took KWDSHG two years to collect the raw materials and three months to complete the construction. Not a mean effort, but we completed it!
3. **Social Capital**: Grootaert (1998:1) defines social capital as the "internal social and cultural coherence of society, the norms and values that governs interactions among people and the institutions in which they are embedded". Most members of the KWDSHG are inter-related therefore levels of trust, solidarity and reciprocity - their values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and social norms that create the conditions under which the group work together for a common good - are critical in enabling the group make a difference in the community - i.e. acknowledging the diversity of strengths, weaknesses and harnessing these – 'if I cannot lift this stone or mix cement, I can cook!' – all important activities for common good.

THE WAY FORWARD

We will continue to make progress in line with our plans:

For water access, KWDSHG has committed to construct five (5) sand dams by 2029. With one completed and the second one under way, the group are beginning to address the issue of water distribution both for domestic use (hygiene), irrigation (food security) and income generation (job creation). The built sand dam (1st one) has a sub-tank which is installed with distribution outlets in each wing. KWDSHG will seek to collaborate with ASDF and its donor 'Just a Drop' to begin discussion when the installation and distribution may begin. This will enable more members, especially those farthest from the sand dam to access the water. More specifically:

a) Source and install drip irrigation system in the vegetable & bean demo plots using a submersible solar energy pump. This will ease manual hauling of water and hopefully increase harvest yields
b) Procure a plastic water tank which will use gravity for regular watering our vegetables.

In our work plan we said we will seed and plant 1,000 tree seedlings annually. We have exceeded this target over the past two years, and have over 1,000 seedlings in our nursery. We want to

maintain this momentum and continue with tree-planting, especially fruit tree farming for income generation.

For the table banking, we intend to increase the number of members and the number of shares a member may buy. New members have already joined for the construction of the new sand dam. These will be incorporated and will need to open channels for increasing the number of shares a member may purchase per month. More, so, double the operating capital to 200,000 by 2026.

Organic Farming: KWDSHG has partnered with Bio-Vision Africa Trust to champion sustainable food security and environmental health. We have learnt organic manure and fertilizer making using readily available materials. The aim is to reduce use of chemical fertilizers.

All these projects/activities are intertwined: the common threads are environmental conservation and preservation, focusing on self-reliance, confidence, resilience and sustainability. The tree planting, energy saving stoves, environmentally friendly sanitary towels, and the various training components all contribute to future climate mitigation measures.